

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 19

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
4 March 1980

Will old subs torpedo SALT?

By Herbert Scoville Jr.

After President Carter requested the Senate to postpone deliberation of SALT II following the invasion of Afghanistan, the State Department announced that the US would nevertheless continue to observe the provisions of the SALT I agreements and avoid taking any actions that would defeat the object and purpose of SALT II, as long as the Soviets exercised similar restraint. So far the Soviets are apparently going along. These actions were taken because of the clear understanding that mutual limitations on strategic weapons were in the security interests of both countries, even though the US was in a period of sharp confrontation with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

But it may be easier for both governments to make such statements than it will be to carry out such policies. In the next six months both President Carter and President Brezhnev will be required to make decisions that will test their leadership ability. Specifically these will involve whether the US and the USSR will abide by the ceilings on submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) established in the SALT I Interim Agreement of 1972.

In this agreement the Soviet Union was limited to 950 SLBM launchers, a level which it reached more than a year ago. However, the Soviet Union has a continuing program for building new DELTA-class submarines with long-range SLBMs, and at US insistence it has been removing missile launchers from the older Y-class submarines as fast as the new DELTA submarines begin sea trials. The US has monitored this process through the US-USSR Standing Consultative Commission, which was established by SALT I and is continuing to operate even in this renewed cold war atmosphere.

But these Y-class submarines are really not obsolete; most of them have been operational for ten years or less. Sometime in the next month or so the Soviet Union will have another DELTA-class submarine ready to begin sea trials. Will the Soviet military in the present political climate be willing to scrap the missiles on a relatively new Y-class submarine in the hopes of keeping a shaky SALT process alive?

The US will soon be facing a similar dilemma. The first US Trident submarine is scheduled for sea trials in July, 1980. If the US is to abide by the SALT I limits, it will have to simultaneously decommission a much older Polaris boat. Prior to the Afghanistan crisis five such Polaris submarines were scheduled for retirement in the current year. But in the

present climate there are certain to be strong arguments to continue these in the strategic force.

When the interim agreement officially expired in October, 1977, Senator Henry Jackson questioned the legality of the US's continuing to live up to its provisions thereafter. At that time he got little support for this campaign, since prospects for SALT II negotiations appeared high, and it was clearly in the US interest to have the Soviets abide by the SALT I ceilings. Now this issue is almost certain to be raised again and to obtain wider support. The SALT opponents may seek to veto funds for following approved SALT procedures for verifying that the Polaris missile submarines are actually removed from the strategic force.

If President Carter is to resist such pressures aimed at torpedoing SALT at this time, he will be required to demonstrate alertness and leadership of a type to which he has not been prone when dealing with the hawks in the Senate. Furthermore, it will be necessary for the US to make clear in advance to the Soviet Union that it proposes to follow through on its commitment to keep within the limits on the total number of ballistic missile submarines and to follow verifiable procedures if it wishes to forestall an earlier Soviet decision to break through the SALT I ceilings and keep both its current Y-class and new DELTA-class missile submarines operational.

These are examples of decisions that cannot be deferred, for a breach in the SALT I ceilings can rapidly lead to an unravelling of the entire SALT process. As even some of the hawks and SALT opponents are finally beginning to realize, limits on Soviet strategic weapons are even more important in periods of confrontation than during détente. It would be a tragedy if the future of strategic arms limitations were allowed to be jeopardized by ignoring this issue at this time or by letting it become a victim of presidential politics.

During the coming months there will undoubtedly be other examples where mutual restraint will be required, and both governments must be continuously alert if SALT is not to be irretrievably damaged. As Secretary of Defense Harold Brown said in a recent report, SALT II is an arms control agreement "that will enhance our security through limits on the Soviet threat." Opportunities to improve security through arms control instead of by spending billions of scarce dollars should not be wasted lightly.

Herbert Scoville Jr., president of the Arms Control Association, was formerly assistant director, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and deputy director for research of the CIA.